

Recruiting Human Service Employees in Good Times and Otherwise

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The critical shortage in human service workers, first recognized in the 1980s, has not abated. Quite the contrary, it has become worse. Whether recruiting in good economic times or in times of uncertainty, finding and hiring direct support professionals to support people with developmental disabilities has become a constant challenge. The Massachusetts Department of Mental Retardation (DMR) and its provider agencies had to compete in recent years with nearly every private company, non-profit organization, and even other state agencies, for a scarcer and scarcer pool of workers.

Demand for staff increased while the number of appropriately skilled people applying for positions decreased. According to a report issued in 1999 by the National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services, Inc., in Massachusetts, as in other states, nearly half of the individuals with disabilities not presently receiving services were living with caregivers over the age of sixty. Adding fuel to the fire is, that while there has been funding to increase salaries of staff over the past few years, the pay scale is inadequate.

Mother states across the country—including Alaska, California, Wyoming, Kansas, Texas, Connecticut, North Carolina, Maryland, and Pennsylvania—have identified the lack of direct support professionals as one of the most significant issues in the provision of quality supports to people with disabilities. More and more, people with disabilities are expressing their concern regarding the inability to find dependable direct support workers. Massachusetts DMR implemented a number of strategies to recruit and retain qualified staff.

Piloting a New, Collaborative Approach

In early 1999, DMR in collaboration with a group of providers decided it was time to act. While the independent agencies with whom the Department contracts for services were ultimately responsible for hiring more direct support workers, DMR felt that it could take action to help them find those prospective workers. A pilot program was proposed in the metropolitan Boston area to help.

At that time, the DMR Metro Region served 9,000 adults in the greater Boston area, working with approximately 100 independent agencies, ranging from the very small to very large. DMR asked interested agencies to a planning meeting, inviting them to jointly develop new approaches to recruiting direct support professionals. DMR said it would support the effort by providing professional staff assistance and initial funding. About 25 agencies signed on showed an interest.

This response suggested two things. First, everyone agreed on the need for more workers. Second, the independent agencies, committed to fulfilling their mission of providing services, were ready to act beyond the norm to find the people they desperately needed. DMR's role was to facilitate this. Most, if not all, of the agencies already had recruitment efforts of one sort or another in place. This pilot program was meant to augment those efforts, and most agencies saw it in this light.

Critical to the pilot program's success was the ability of DMR to recognize that the agencies understood their needs better than anyone else. Everyone also knew that neither the agencies nor DMR were professional marketers. To achieve results, the pilot program required outside assistance. DMR and the provider agencies hired Parker & James Communications, Inc., a Dedham, Mass., marketing communications company, which had successfully worked with non-profit human service agencies delivering supports to individuals with developmental disabilities.

In the first year, the Metro Region of the Department of Mental Retardation paid \$60,000 for Parker & James Communications to develop and manage the campaign, implement strategies, and create all the marketing tools. The 25 participating agencies each contributed up to \$2,000, a total of \$40,000, to pay for advertising and the expense of printing all the collateral materials. Some of the smaller agencies contributed less than agencies with a larger budget. In addition, the Department dedicated a point person to work as part of the "team" with staff from Parker & James and the provider agencies involved to insure optimal coordination.

Creating a Road Map

From the start the pilot program had two overarching goals. First and foremost was to recruit direct service workers. Second, and over the longer term, all participants wanted to increase public awareness of the need for direct support professionals, the positive contributions that people working in the field make every day, and the fact that many individuals with developmental disabilities are successfully integrating into their local communities. The thinking was — and still is — that as the general public more fully understands these messages, the easier it may become to recruit future workers.

The first thing the agencies and Parker & James did was assess the current situation. Where did the agencies recruit their workers? How many people did they need? What pay and benefits did they provide? What was their turnover rate? What recruiting tactics had they tried? What worked? What didn't? What hadn't they tried?

A survey was created, based on agency input, and distributed throughout the Metro Region. This generated valuable benchmark information, which helped shape the subsequent campaign. The information also gave the agencies a chance to learn from each other.

Having a firm sense of the agencies' experiences was an important start. It was also important to understand what motivated direct service workers to stay with their work,

especially as many knew that they could most likely obtain higher-paying jobs in other industries. To learn their story, extensive interviews were conducted with direct service workers — both long time employees and relative newcomers. Since the agencies wanted to attract more people providing direct service, it was important to learn why these people liked their work.

Parker & James held six directed group discussions at work sites, involving a total of about 40 people over the course of six weeks. In most cases, the meetings were held without managers and supervisors present. A consistent story emerged. Workers came from a wide variety of backgrounds. They included teachers, nursing assistants, taxi drivers, bank clerks, restaurant managers, factory workers, and they included new college grads as well as empty nesters. Many had more or less stumbled onto the idea of direct service work and were willing to give it a try. The ones who stayed on found they had discovered something very important: this was work where they could make a difference and where their efforts were deeply and sincerely appreciated by people with disabilities, family, supervisors, and co-workers. For many, it was the first work situation in which they felt genuinely appreciated. The campaign's theme—*Some people are lucky enough to love their work*—emerged directly from this research.

Once this initial dual-level research involving the agencies and direct service workers was completed, an initial marketing promotion plan was scoped out. A 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week, toll-free number (888-444-1616) was set up to receive all calls. Parker & James also implemented mechanisms to keep track of which promotional tactic yielded results.

To focus attention on the effort, an official launch date for the recruitment campaign was set for May 1999 with a kick-off event at the State House. A well-known local radio personality agreed to act as master of ceremonies. Commissioner Morrissey and legislative leaders in the field attended and spoke. Agency administrators honored outstanding direct support professionals, who also shared their stories. To give greater visibility to the need for more direct service workers, extensive television, radio, and newspaper coverage of the event helped publicize the launch. An informational brochure was produced along with posters in time for the launch. The direct support professionals who attended the event wore "I'm one of the lucky ones" buttons.

In the following months, posters were sent to agencies, libraries, job centers, churches, senior centers, and other distribution points. Direct mail campaigns were also initiated. News stories profiling direct care workers were developed and placed in local newspapers. Radio interviews were given. Ads were created and placed in regional and local newspapers, and selected college newspapers. Nearly a year after the launch, a job fair was held. Although it featured the participating agencies, non-participating agencies in the Metro Region were invited to participate, and about half a dozen did.

A Web site (<http://www.rewardingwork.org/>) was also created. This became especially important because agencies recruited outside Massachusetts, particularly in Ireland, England, and the Czech Republic. The Web efficiently reaches prospective workers in

those countries and provides a way for Internet-savvy local people to learn about the need for workers.

Everything that was done — brochures, flyers, PR stories, ads, direct mail, Web site, job fair, phone scripts — was based on input and guidance from the participating provider agencies who met monthly with Parker & James and with staff from the Department.

First Year Results

During its first year, the recruitment campaign — nicknamed the “rewarding work” campaign based on the Web site URL — generated 2,000 inquiries from people of all ages and backgrounds who wanted to learn more about working with adults with mental retardation. Of these, more than 120 people were hired. Given the total costs for the first year, including the initial start-up costs to develop the campaign, this amounted to approximately \$800 per hire.

Neither DMR nor the agencies could predict what the results would be. Everyone approached the campaign from the perspective that it was a work in progress and that every tactic tried would be a test. If something worked, it could and most often was repeated and expanded. If something didn’t achieve impressive results, it wasn’t automatically abandoned. Instead, the agencies, along with Parker & James, dug deeper into what was going on in an attempt to fine-tune the effort.

Lessons Learned from the Pilot Program

The provider agencies participating in the recruitment campaign, as well as DMR itself, learned a lot during the first year. Here are some of the key lessons.

People want to do meaningful work.

The fact that 2,000 people responded to the campaign during one of the hottest economies ever, shows that the independent agencies provide desirable work. Like any work, there must be a good match between worker and job. Clearly, working with individuals with developmental disabilities is not for everyone, but then not everyone wants to be a school teacher, policeman, stock broker, or banker. *Bottom line:* Given the chance to learn about the work the agencies provide, people will respond.

Cooperation pays off.

Competition is a mantra in the business and even non-profit worlds, but more and more organizations are learning that cooperation pays off. Many times during planning meetings, the agencies partaking in the recruitment campaign shared ideas and tips to help each other. They frequently would refer a prospective worker to other agencies if the fit was not right for them, knowing that the favor would be returned. At the job fair, many agencies found that in addition to meeting prospective workers, they could learn more about each other in ways that would help all of them achieve their goals. *Bottom line:*

Provider agencies have a lot to gain by communicating with each other, and virtually nothing to lose.

Autonomy is critical.

From the beginning, DMR said it would sponsor the effort and provide support, but that it was up to the agencies to share and direct the campaign. The independent agencies were asked to contribute funds toward advertising, printing, and mailings. Their financial contribution gave provider agencies a greater stake in the venture. If there were any doubts about the Department's promise to let the agencies run the show, they were dispelled. The agencies drove the campaign from the start. Their willingness to stay with the campaign, especially as agency representatives themselves are very strapped for time, indicates more than anything else that it was worth their while. *Bottom line:* People thrive on developing solutions in which they have a stake.

Follow-up is essential.

People who call a toll-free number in response to ads or other promotions need a quick response. At mid-year the group interviewed and hired a coordinator to handle inquiries. However, it was always up to each agency to screen, interview, and hire prospects. Some agencies were more aggressive about this than others, and the more aggressive ones tended to hire more and feel more positive about the campaign. Interestingly, larger agencies with in-house human resource departments did not necessarily hire more people. In fact, the contrary was often the case. Smaller agencies, which may have depended more on the campaign, often committed more effort to ensure that they got results. *Bottom line:* Each agency had to take responsibility to ensure its own success.

Tracking results is key.

The best way to realize the success of the campaign is to keep track of results, and the campaign carefully monitored responses from all of its outreach efforts. This enabled program participants to make informed judgments about next steps as they went along, and provided an ongoing benchmark against which to evaluate success. *Bottom line:* Detailing results is essential.

Having professional assistance is vital.

The campaign would not have gotten off the ground and would not have been able to accomplish as much as it did in such a relatively short time without a marketing partner that understood the population being served, the needs of the agencies and the Department, and which could also provide expert counsel and execute well. *Bottom line:* Contracting for the right expertise saves a lot of time and effort on everyone's part.

Expanding the campaign

In the fall of 2000, the "rewarding work" campaign was expanded from the Metro Region to include providers in other parts of the Commonwealth. Having seen that independent agencies can team up to attract people to the human services field, the Commissioner's Office was receptive to expanding the program to other areas of the state. The need for direct support workers, as well as supervisors and managers, was as acute as ever and a

coordinated promotion campaign was one of the most cost efficient and quickest means of identifying prospective employees.

The Process

With the Metro Region model providing a guide, the infrastructure and processes for an expanded campaign were well understood from the start. As with the pilot project, each DMR region involved provided funding for ongoing strategic counsel, campaign planning, as well as public relations counsel and program execution from the marketing consultant. Each participating agency was asked to contribute funds toward program expenses such as newspaper advertising, printing, mailing, bulk postage, Web hosting, and the toll-free telephone and answering service.

A fair amount of thought was given to determining how much each agency should provide. There was a need to fairly share the costs, but to share them in a way that was commensurate with agency size. Some agencies employed less than a dozen people while others had many hundreds of employees. In the end, the campaign adopted a formula based on the dollar size of the state contract each agency had. Furthermore, each agency could pro-rate the total amount of their commitment to each region in which they operated, as many had work sites that crossed DMR regions.

Agency contributions for the year ranged from \$500 to \$4,000. The contributions totaled \$120,000, which was used for all advertising efforts, including space advertising, Web site modifications, brochures, video, and other collateral materials. The Department contributed an additional \$150,000 for strategy development, meetings, communications, and all public relations activities.

As with the initial program, the expanded campaign was based from the start on customizing promotional tactics as much as possible to the specific needs of each region. This was very important since the Metro Region was primarily an urban and suburban region, while the other regions tended to have urban pockets and many rural areas.

To ensure that each region's promotion effort was appropriately focused, the marketing consultant met twice each month with the provider agencies in each region involved in the early months of the expanded campaign. Agency participation at each meeting tended to vary since agency representatives had numerous other commitments and demands on their time. To accommodate this reality and to keep the campaign going, an important ground rule to which everyone agreed was that whoever was at the meeting would make the decisions which needed to be made that day. These included issues such as where to advertise, which mailing lists to test, and what the appropriate wording would be on print materials. If agency representatives could not make a meeting, but wanted to provide input, they could do so through their regional liaison.

Learning from the pilot program, the state assigned a liaison in each region to help provide campaign continuity. The liaison participated in the campaign in addition to his or her ongoing responsibilities in other areas. Liaisons proved to be critical to the success of the expanded campaign. They provided the "glue" among participating independent agencies by communicating the message of the campaign to those agencies. Liaisons

offered a historical perspective to the agencies and the outside marketing consultants, not just about the state's view of what worked in the past, but also about current thinking and new directions from professional and state policy viewpoints.

Ongoing contact with the agencies was maintained as needed, often several times a week. If between scheduled agency meetings a question arose requiring a quick answer, liaisons contacted agency representatives for input via email, voicemail, and telephone conversations for a quick decision. In this way, the campaign could keep rolling along even though decision makers were spread in more than 50 locations throughout the state.

New Promotion Opportunities

Expanding the recruitment effort enabled the campaign to undertake a number of promotions that previously were not economically feasible when the campaign was focused on one region. They included the following.

Building brand identity

With the campaign expanding, all participating agencies readily agreed that it made sense to build upon the theme of the pilot campaign. This included using the campaign slogan, *Some people are lucky enough to love their work*, as well as the graphical elements developed in the campaign's early phase.

Critical to the long-term success of the campaign was the development of brand identity. It is a concept practiced everyday in the commercial and business worlds, but which most human service agencies working with the state, and the state itself, do not ordinarily embrace. It is just a different way of thinking about one's mission. For that reason working with a professional marketing agency was very important, as they brought this perspective to the campaign and also provided continuous, valuable advice and experience to help the campaign build brand identity and awareness.

Broader direct mail

Greater participation by more agencies provided more funds, which, in turn, let the campaign test more direct mail lists. It also meant that unit printing and mailing costs dropped because the campaign captured economies of scale that were unavailable before.

Increased advertising

With more agencies participating, the campaign could advertise in publications that reached multiple DMR regions. This helped generate more responses, especially from geographical areas that ordinarily could not be reached either because no one publication served those areas or because the cost to advertise specifically in those areas was cost prohibitive.

Wider public relations

Integral to the campaign, even in the pilot program, was a grass roots public relations effort that told the story of direct support professionals in the communities where they work and live. Frequently, this took the form of feature stories that profiled the workers

and explained how they became involved in the field, what their work means to them, and why they enjoy it. This effort was expanded as the campaign grew. More participating agencies meant more stories to tell, published in more newspapers.

In addition, because the campaign expanded, there was an opportunity to tell a statewide story about the expansion of the campaign. This was a logical follow-up to the kick-off event held when the pilot program was launched, and resulted in coverage in statewide, regional, and local papers throughout Massachusetts.

Television and radio

Broadcast media provide highly effective ways to reach large numbers of people and, with the expansion of the campaign, it became possible to access these communication channels. During the pilot program, it was decided not to use broadcast media, because they would reach too many people and generate responses from outside the metropolitan Boston area, which the pilot program could not handle.

When the campaign expanded, several tactics were employed to take advantage of these channels while keeping advertising costs down. Print versions of a public service announcement were developed and sent to all radio stations in the areas where campaign participants operated. In addition, a video public service announcement was developed and distributed to all broadcast and cable television stations in the same areas.

Development of the video public service announcement proved to be an enriching experience for the provider agencies. To make it work, a task force was created to work on the project. Any agency that wanted to take part was welcomed. Over the course of several months, the agencies met to discuss and agree on an approach that would work for them. While a task force requires more time to coordinate, it proved to be the right way to go. Since different agencies most often differed from each other in terms of the population they serve and the services they provide, it was important to create a product that would satisfy everyone. It was not obvious from the start what that approach ought to be. But by the time the project concluded, everyone was convinced the process had been correct and, more importantly, that the video worked. The video public service announcement was broadcast — free of charge — on TV stations throughout the state. In the first three months of the video's airing, the campaign received more than 300 calls from people who saw the video.

Grass roots tactics

Greater agency participation allowed the campaign to try tactics that, again, were less cost effective when fewer agencies were available to shoulder the expenses. One example was the development of bumper stickers. This grass roots tactic was yet another way to get the word out to prospective employees. It certainly was not at the top of the list, but an expanded effort made possible to try.

A variation of the original poster was also developed. The message and theme remained the same, but the poster was made smaller to enable display in more locations. In addition to mailing the posters to libraries, senior centers, job centers, churches, and synagogues, posters were sent to agencies for local distribution. Some agencies organized

outings of their employees and individuals they serve, asking local businesses, such as laundromats, health clubs, and convenience stores, to hang the poster. In addition, one region developed a PowerPoint presentation that could easily be adjusted by others. This was used at job fairs and in connection with presentations to local organizations such as the Rotary Club. The presentation was also included in a display used by coordinators who traveled to local colleges to inform students about the opportunity to work in human services.

Integrated Web site

When the campaign broadened to include eventually about 80 agencies with sites in hundreds of locations, it became necessary to share information most effectively. The Web provided the solution.

Working closely with the agencies, the campaign's marketing consultants developed detailed specifications for enhancing the existing Web site (www.rewardingwork.org). Since the individuals participating in the campaign had different experiences using the Web, it was very important that enhancements to the site worked for the vast majority of users. As with the video public service announcement, taking the time to fashion a solution acceptable to all, as opposed to just implementing a workable solution with little regard to individual preferences, paid off handsomely. Key improvements included:

Links to all participating agencies

Every participating agency is listed so that visitors browsing the site can find agencies with work sites in the towns of interest to them. Different approaches let visitors find agencies in different ways, including clicking on a map of the state, and then "drilling down" to specific towns.

"Pseudo" Web pages

Along with basic agency information, including telephone, email addresses, and related data, the agency information pages link to Web sites if the agencies have one. Smaller agencies, which tend not to have their own Web site, can have a one-page site developed for them at no additional cost. These "pseudo" Web pages provide space for the agencies to describe what they do and the types of jobs they're looking to fill. Agencies can even tailor details such as type fonts and colors to give their "pseudo" page a distinctive look.

An online database of respondents

Perhaps the most important enhancement to the Web site was the development of a private, password-protected database containing information on all people responding to the campaign. By logging in to this non-public part of the Web site, participating provider agencies can search for names of prospective hires that meet their criteria. For example, if an agency wants to learn about people who live in a particular city, are willing to work weekends, and have a driver's license, all they have to do is click the appropriate fields on an online form and hit the enter key. The names of people fitting the description will be displayed. All the information on those people come from responses they gave the telephone operators when calling the toll-free response line or from information they

themselves provided when completing a form on the public side of the Web site, requesting an interview.

Since this database captures all the information generated by the many tactics of the campaign, it is a valuable list that cannot be matched elsewhere. Agencies that are thinking about joining the campaign sign up immediately when they see this database. Consistent with the spirit and nature of the campaign, all names are available to everyone participating in the campaign.

A private previewing section

Another enhancement, which has become important to the smooth functioning of the campaign, is a private, password-protected previewing section, available to all participating agencies. Because detailed information sometimes has to be shared quickly, the preview area of the Web site provides a place where participants can go to view proofs of ads and other collateral print material in progress. A simple email broadcast to all agencies, asking them to view certain documents and respond by a certain time, keeps the campaign moving along despite widespread geographical locations.

First-Year Results from the Expanded Campaign

During its first year, the expanded campaign collected the names of approximately 5,000 people looking to learn more about opportunities to work with individuals with developmental disabilities. This is a significant step forward toward the larger, long-term objective of educating the general public about people with developmental disabilities. Provider agencies hired over 200 of these people.

Of those prospects who called the toll free telephone number or accessed the Web site, nearly 70% had direct support or related experience. They listed their experience as CNA's, Home health providers, LPN's, day care providers, and teachers. They had previously worked for DMR, other provider agencies, in nursing homes, and in hospitals. Approximately, 60% graduated from high school and 40% attended college for some period of time.

One key result of the campaign has been its effect on participating agencies. While individual agency experience varies, the more actively involved the agency is with the campaign, the more success it enjoys. Agencies employing a systematic approach of following up prospect calls, and who integrate that activity with other recruitment and retention strategies outside the campaign, were considerably more likely to hire people from the campaign. In fact, several agencies said they were paring back virtually all other promotion efforts because the "rewarding work" campaign was proving a highly efficient way of identifying prospective job candidates at very low cost.

As importantly, the expanded direct support worker recruitment campaign started to build a brand, accomplishing something that happens very rarely in government-related promotion. Establishing a brand requires the consistent use of integrated tactics aimed at supporting an overall strategy. Making it happen requires the application of sufficient

resources over time, which is precisely why many programs, inside and even outside of government, fall short. People give up before the brand has had a chance to establish itself. In the case of the workforce recruitment campaign, the “rewarding work” brand is being given a chance to take root and, as expected, will continue to gain strength as the program continues.

Lessons Learned from the Expanded Recruitment Campaign

First, worker recruitment at all levels — direct support employees, supervisors and managers — is a continuous process that requires an open mind that is always looking for and receptive to new ideas. One of the ways the Massachusetts recruitment campaign accomplishes this is through periodic brainstorming sessions run by the marketing consultant. Just when agencies thought they knew what to expect the marketing consultant would, at one of the regular meetings, start brainstorming new ideas and new approaches with everyone. This not only helped generate a constant flow of new ideas, but also kept everyone engaged on a fairly high level.

Second, working with multiple agencies increases the numbers of perspectives and opinions to consider. Working with larger numbers of people means working with people who bring different levels of commitment to the campaign. This is no different than working with any group: some people will be full of energy and ideas, while others are participating because they have been directed by their supervisor to take part. Nonetheless, the campaign wanted to engage everyone because people with differing perspectives bring different ideas to the surface from which everyone benefits. Again, the marketing consultant played an important role in fostering inclusion and, had this not been handled carefully, momentum could have been lost.

Third, there is no magic that transforms prospective hires into actual employees. While the expanded recruitment campaign generated 5,000 responses in its first 12 months, turning those people into hires was the job of the hiring agencies. They are the people who know who will fit in. They’re the people who have to connect with prospects, to learn why they may want to become direct support workers. Results, as one may expect, vary widely. Some agencies were able to hire 40 or 50 people over the course of a year. Some hired a dozen or less, while some hired none. While some of the difference was the need for workers, or pay scales, or work environments, some of the difference was also in the people who were doing the follow-up work.

Fourth, changing economic times do not necessarily make recruiting easier. While tougher economic times and higher unemployment, in theory, should increase the pool of potential workers, relying on this approach to fill jobs is short sighted. Once the business cycle turns positive, and employment opportunities grow, many people who took lower paying human service jobs because little else was available leave for greener pastures at the first chance. A programmatic, ongoing approach is the real answer. The long-term solution involves continuous outreach and education.

Fifth, implementing a systematic recruitment program without putting in place corresponding employee development and retention programs may be a fruitless exercise. If, when recruiting people, agencies rely on the intangible rewards of the job — work environment, good supervisors and co-workers, flexible hours — because they cannot offer high pay, they must deliver those intangibles. They must create workplaces where employees feel truly welcomed and valued.

Conclusions

Despite changing economic conditions and state budgets, there remains a strong — *and growing* — need for human service workers. Massachusetts alone needs 1,000 new direct support professionals each year for the foreseeable future. In addition, another 1,000 staff are needed each year to replace existing workers who leave their jobs. This in itself is a demanding proposition. The situation gets tougher still because demographics are working against this need. Fewer and fewer people are entering the field and, unfortunately, human services work is not held in high esteem.

Systemic problems require systematic responses. In this case, the enduring need for direct support professionals, supervisors, and managers will only be solved in the short, medium, and long term by recruiting new employees on a consistent basis. The crisis faced by the Massachusetts Department of Mental Retardation, as well as by its counterparts in virtually every state of the nation, has been around off and on since the 1980s. Had a systematic solution of the type embodied in the Massachusetts worker recruitment campaign been instituted early on, there may be less of a crisis today. An integrated, ongoing recruitment campaign is part of a fuller solution.

Although the recruitment campaign remains a work in progress, it has demonstrated that independent agencies cooperating with each other and the state can effectively forge new ways to identify and recruit qualified prospects. Whatever economic conditions prevail, people want to be engaged in work that is not only personally satisfying, but also which makes a difference in the lives of others.

For more information about the Rewarding Work campaign, contact the author, Jeff Keilson at (781) 910-7216 or JAKeilson@aol.com. Online information about the campaign is available at <http://www.rewardingwork.com>.

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